Activity Introduction

Hey, there! How’s it going? My name is (name). In your United States history class, you’ve learned what happens when a new country gets started.

Have you ever wondered what happens when a country ceases to exist? That’s a pretty crazy concept, right? Well, it’s happened before, and not even that long ago.

Let’s take a look at the collapse of the Soviet Union, and see how it all went down.

Video 1 - Introduction

Things were changing quickly in the Soviet Union. The deaths of three leaders in less than three years really shook things up. Check out this video and see what happened next.

Video 1

After World War Two, the Soviet Union was the main rival to the United States and the Cold War. By the mid 1980’s, the Soviet Union was undergoing profound and fundamental changes. These changes were brought on in part by the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev, as the leader of the Soviet Union in 1985 and the end of the influence of older, hard run communists. But how did the rise to power of one man make a difference?

After the death of Leonid Brezhnev in 1982, the Soviet Union endured three rapid changes in leadership. Yuri Andropov became the leader of the Soviet Union on Brezhnev’s death, but Andropov was also of Brezhnev’s generation and had been the
head of the K.G.B. in the 1960’s. Andropov was also a hard line communist and relations with the West deteriorated during his brief reign. When Andropov died in 1984, the leadership of the Soviet Union passed to Konstantin Chernenko. Chernenko, who ruled for just over a year, was also a hard line communist and did little to endear himself with the West.

When Chernenko died in March of 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev took over leadership of the Soviet Union when he was elected to General Secretary of the Communist Party. Gorbachev created the office of the President of the Soviet Union in 1990 and served in that capacity until the end of the U.S.S.R. in 1991. These men were leaders of the Soviet Union at a time when the American President, Ronald Reagan, was taking an increasingly hard line against communism throughout the world.

With the ascension of Gorbachev, a new generation of Soviet leadership took over for the first time since the Bolshevik Revolution. Gorbachev was not much younger than previous leaders and he came to power with what amounted to radical ideas for restructuring the Soviet Union. His plan came to be known by two separate names, perestroika, or restructuring, and glasnost, which means openness. These programs resulted in a radical change in the economic structure of the Soviet Union. One of the major changes of Gorbachev’s reign was the replacement of Andrei Gromyko as Soviet Foreign Minister by Eduard Shevardnadze.

He was an inexperienced diplomat, but shared ideals with Gorbachev and brought with him the support the agricultural region of Georgia. Perestroika led to such reforms as the Law of Cooperatives in 1988, which allowed for private ownership of businesses and the Soviet Joint Venture Law in 1987, which allowed for foreign investment in the Soviet state owned corporations. In 1986, the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl Nuclear
Power Plant in the Ukraine gave Gorbachev an even greater impetus for reform of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev blamed the old Soviet bureaucracy for a slow response to the disaster, a disaster that caused a widespread release of radiation across the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. It provided even more control for internal reform for Gorbachev.

By 1987, under increasing pressure from the United States, the pace of reform in the U.S.S.R. increased. It was in 1987 that President Ronald Reagan delivered his famous speech in Berlin exhorting Gorbachev to tear down this wall, referring to the Berlin Wall that had divided the city. It was also in 1987 that the U.S. And U.S.S.R. signed the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, eliminating an entire class of nuclear weapons. In the Soviet Union, 1987 saw the first multi party elections and saw people who were not Communists Party members appointed to government offices.

In 1988, Gorbachev introduced more personal freedoms in the Soviet Union under glasnost. This included more freedom of the press and the release of thousands of political prisoners. These reforms, like other reforms proposed by Alexander Dubcek in Czechoslovakia in 1968, but the Soviet Union was far more receptive to the changes in the 1980's than it had ever been in the 1960's.

The reforms of the 1980's in the Soviet Union paved the way for the collapse of the Eastern block and the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991, but people had paid a heavy price in trying to recover from the failed policies of the communist regimes that ruled with an iron fist from the 1940’s until the collapse.

Reading Passage Introduction
Gorbachev was the man who was going to make real change happen in the U.S.S.R. Major reforms in politics and the economy were on the way.

You can watch that video again, or we can keep on truckin’.

Video 1 – Recap

Gorbachev was the man who was going to make real change happen in the U.S.S.R. Major reforms in politics and the economy were on the way.

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Reading Passage Introduction

While Gorbachev was leading the Soviet Union, Ronald Reagan was leading the United States. Many of President Reagan’s actions put pressure on the Soviet Union to change.

This reading passage will fill you in on the details.

Video 2 - Introduction

The U.S. wasn’t alone in its criticism of the U.S.S.R. People throughout Europe were starting to challenge the presence of communist governments.

Let this video enlighten you further!

Video 2

The reforms in the U.S.S.R. in the 1980’s, such as glasnost and perestroika led to drastic changes, not only in the Soviet Union, but also in its satellite states in Eastern Europe. President Ronald Reagan helped call for change when, during the speech in Berlin, Germany, he said, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.” These changes resulted in the break up of the Soviet Union and the separation of the Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe, which remade the map of Europe and ended the Cold War in a matter of years. So what led to the collapse of the Soviet Union?
In the late 1980’s, the Soviet Union abandoned the so called Brezhnev Doctrine, which had been the justification for Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and in Afghanistan in 1979. The Brezhnev Doctrine called for Soviet intervention in any communist country undergoing a rebellion, but by the late 1980’s, this had become impractical and the policy was abandoned. It allowed the Soviet satellite nations to go out on their own without Soviet interference.

The wave of reform in Communist Eastern Europe began in Poland in the early 1980’s. An independent labor union called Solidarity was formed, but it was quickly outlawed by the communist government. Leaders of the Solidarity Movement, including Lech Walesa, were jailed, but the movement persisted. By 1988, Solidarity had gained enough power to stage strikes and disrupt industry. And by 1989, the government was forced to negotiate with the Solidarity Movement to reorganize the government. The Solidarity Movement became a political party and swept the elections, leading to the first noncommunist government in Eastern Europe since World War Two. After the success of the Polish people in making political reforms a reality, democratic reform spread very quickly through Eastern Europe, landing next in Hungary in mid 1989.

The Hungarian Communist Party reorganized the government in October of 1989 and called for democratic multi party elections and guaranteed a new Constitution with protections for human rights and civil liberties. By the end of 1989, East Germany was also overtaken by reform. In October, the East German Communist Party threw out his hard line communist leader, Erich Honecker and replaced him with Egon Krenz, who was more open to reform.
In early November, East Germany opened its borders with Czechoslovakia, which in turn allowed East Germans to travel freely to West Germany, thus dismantling a major part of the Iron Curtain. A few days later, border guards at the Berlin Wall began to let East Germans through the border crossings. This resulted in the fall of the Berlin Wall. Germany quickly moved toward reunification and East and West Germany came back together in October of 1990, 45 years after they had been divided because of the Cold War between Soviet Russian and the U.S. Also, near the end of 1989, Czechoslovakia had its own revolution, which was dubbed the Velvet Revolution.

Street protests in Prague in November and in early December, 1989, eventually involved half a million people and they quickly brought down the government and resulted in an election of a dramatist and intellectual, Vaclav Havel as president of Czechoslovakia and communist reformer, Alexander Dubcek, the architect of the 1968 Prague Spring Movement, as Speaker of the Parliament. In Romania, things moved even more quickly than in the other Eastern European nations. The Romanian communist dictator, Nicholae Ceausescu, who had been re-elected in 1989 in a typical rigged communist election, was disposed in a matter of days in December of 1989. Ceausescu and his wife managed to escape, but in May of 1990, they were recaptured and executed.

The revolutions and reform movements in Eastern Europe spread to other parts of the Eastern block and also later to the former Soviet Republics, which also had their own democratic revolutions and reforms. The reforms instituted by Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980’s rippled through the Soviet sphere of influence in the Eastern block and resulted in the fall of communists governments throughout Eastern Europe. The fall of these regimes would lead very quickly to the break up of the Soviet Union in the early 1990’s and to the end of the Cold War between the United States and the U.S.S.R.
Video 2 - Recap

People were certainly willing to risk a lot to gain their freedoms. The Solidarity movement in Poland was a good example of these risks, and before long, the movement gained international attention.

Take another look at the video, or let’s keep on cruisin’.

Reading Passage Introduction

Things continued to change in the Soviet Union, but the biggest change of all was yet to come.

In December of nineteen-ninety-one, the Soviet Union ceased to exist. That’s quite a change! Read here to figure out how such a thing could happen.